

LBT again hits emergency funds for beaches

Officials say recent damaging storm provides a wake-up call for easement hold-outs

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— The township dipped into emergency funds this week to repair its battered beaches for the second time this month.

Township officials again stressed that last weekend's northeaster storm should be a wake-up call for oceanfront property owners hesitant to sign easement requests to grant federal and state authorities access to their property for the beach-replenishment work.

Meanwhile, the township has hired a public relations expert to help "put a more positive spin," on the project, Mayor DiAnne Gove said Thursday.

Township officials set aside \$150,000 in emergency funds at their Feb. 3 meeting and quickly spent nearly \$20,000 trucking sand into the Brant Beach area after harsh flooding.

The trucks returned Tuesday and should finish today patching up that same area between 50th and 54th Streets. Municipal Clerk and Township Administrator Bonnie Leonetti said she expected the cost of the rehab work done after last weekend's northeaster to exceed \$20,000.

Starting Tuesday, the township will truck sand to storm-damaged beaches in the Holgate and North Beach sections of the township, Gove said.

The storm also caused significant damage to Bayview Park and to the playground equipment in Holgate.

"Our concern at this point is the fact that we're having some difficulty getting those easements signed," Leonetti said. "These oceanfront owners have to understand that we're using tax dollars every time we do this."

Leonetti said maybe a "couple dozen" of beachfront property owners have signed the easements, a tiny portion of the approximately 600 easements needed from beachfront property owners in the township.

All together, authorities are seeking approximately 800 easements on the island, from the Loveladies section of the township south. Barnegat Light, at the northern end of the island, doesn't need and won't be part of the beach-replenishment project.

Many beachfront property owners refuse to sign the easements until the state Department of Environmental Protection eases its requirements for public access points, public restrooms and parking lots. Attorney Kenneth Porro will discuss options for beachfront property owners at a Feb. 26 meeting at the Holiday Inn on Route 72 in Stafford Township. The meeting was originally scheduled for Sunday, Feb. 12, but was canceled because of the northeaster.

The township has retained public relations man Bob Drake of Loveladies to help the township convey a more positive picture of the beach-replenishment project. Gove said Drake would be paid \$75 an hour on an as-needed basis to write press releases. His salary is not to exceed \$17,500, although Gove said the township would not spend nearly that much on Drake's services.

Gove said the project suffered nearly irreparable damage after a pair of two highly contentious meetings state and federal officials administering the project held with beachfront homeowners in Surf City and the township in December.

"I just feel that there was so much damage done by those meetings we need a good positive message," Gove said.

Drake, 59, was born and raised in New Jersey and worked nearly 30 years in the public relations industry in Omaha, Neb., before moving to Loveladies in 2002. He is on the board of trustees for the Loveladies Property Owners Association. He said his main objective is to provide a unified message from the governing body to the residents regarding the project.

"I'm working with the commissioners to provide more information to more people more often," Drake said. "This way there's fewer surprises for taxpayers and greater understanding for what the mayor and commissioners' positions are on the various issues."

One of Drake's objectives is to stress how important the project is for all island residents, not just beachfront property owners.

"If there's a catastrophic storm the beachfront people are just the first to lose. The next house and the next house, everybody gets swept away," said Drake, who lives two houses off the beach. "We're basically riding on the same bus. If we have a '62-type storm it really doesn't matter if you're beachfront or bayside."